

# Butterfish plentiful: Mid-Atlantic council green lights 22,530-mt directed fishery

FREEHOLD, NJ – At its June 10-12 meeting, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council approved specifications for the butterfish fishery that will increase allowable landings by more than 500% for the 2015-2017 fishing years and allow for the re-establishment of a substantial directed fishery.

The specifications, which were in line with those recommended by the council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), give the industry full benefit of a new stock assessment that determined butterfish is not overfished – and has *not* been overfished all along.

“The butterfish stock size is above the size that produces maximum sustainable yield (MSY) and has been for the entire time series of the assessment – 1989-2012,” stated a summary document provided by the council staff.

After some discussion, the council adopted an annual acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 33,278 metric tons (mt), 31,422 mt, and 30,922 mt respectively for 2015-2017. Compared to the 2013 ABC of 2,489 mt and the 2014 ABC of 9,100 mt, this represents a sizable increase.

In addition, the council adopted directed annual harvest (DAH) levels of 22,530 mt, 21,014 mt, and 20,652 mt respectively for 2015-2017. The DAH is the landings target for each year and is less than the ABC to account for discards and management uncertainties, council staffer Jason Didden explained.

The council opted not to increase the butterfish cap of 3,884 mt for 2015-2017, though.

In the recent past, butterfish was a choke species for the longfin squid fishery. In April 2012, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) closed the longfin squid fishery when

it approached its butterfish catch cap, which, at the time, was 1,436 mt.

“The cap has worked for the past several years without causing closures and, at the current cap level, it should not close the longfin squid fishery if the fishery can continue to minimize butterfish discards,” said Didden.

## Follow the science

The five-fold increase in DAH was worrisome for some council members but strongly supported by others based on the SSC's recommendations.

“There's a promise that the markets are being developed now and there's a place for these fish,” said council

member Laurie Nolan of New York, who offered the motion to adopt the SSC figures. “And, if the fish are there, I say they should have access to them.”

Council member and charter boat captain John McMurray of New

York attempted a substitute motion that would have slowed the increase incrementally by thirds over three years. Uncomfortable with the large jump proposed in Nolan's motion, he noted that the council had yet to adopt a forage fish policy as recommended in the council's strategic plan.

“I don't have a bluefin fishery in the fall if I don't have the butterfish,” McMurray said.

The substitute motion did not garner enough support to pass.

NMFS Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office Regional Administrator John Bullard suggested following the council's Mackerel-Squid-Butterfish (MSB) Monitoring Committee's recommendation, which proposed a slightly more conservative DAH increase to 18,161 mt.

Council member Jeff Kaelin of New Jersey objected to this approach.

“We ought to be happy about our

*There's a promise that butterfish markets are being developed now and there's a place for these fish.*

—Laurie Nolan



Steven Kennedy/CFN photo

*I don't know why we shouldn't be pleased as punch to allocate all of these fish after all we went through with butterfish for years.*

—Jeff Kaelin

success,” he said, pointing out that the ecosystem analysis of butterfish habitat helped create a more accurate stock assessment.

“I don't know why we shouldn't be pleased as punch to allocate all of these fish after all we went through with butterfish for years,” Kaelin said.

Greg DiDomenico, executive director of the Garden State Seafood Association, said he went back to his records from 2006 when the butterfish ABC dropped from 5,900 mt to 1,681 mt because of the limited data available at the time. Each year since, fishermen were told they had to reduce butterfish bycatch because “the science said so,” he said.

“Now it's time to do what is to our

benefit because the science says so,” DiDomenico continued. “I have a better understanding of the science because people from the agency allowed people from the industry to sit in and participate. This is the best available science.”

DiDomenico noted that the SSC recommendation set aside 70% of the butterfish stock for forage.

Eric Reid, operations manager of SeaFreeze Shoreside in Narragansett, RI, recalled the time when processing plants existed primarily to pack butterfish.

“The SSC has already taken into account overfishing, MSY, forage, and uncertainties in the model,” Reid said.

“And, I won't argue with the SSC. The science says the fish are there. I say, ‘Let's go get 'em.’”

## Promising signs

In summarizing the history of the butterfish fishery, the council staff document explained that the fishery declined in the 1990s “due to a lack of availability and market forces.” Since 2005, landings were restricted by regulations. However, as evidence began to mount of the relative strength of the butterfish resource, the council and NMFS re-established a limited directed fishery in 2013.

Jason Didden said that only a few vessels participated in the first year of directed harvest and that the low 2013

landings were due in part to market uncertainties since butterfish hadn't really been sold in bulk into export markets since the mid-1990s.

Also, he said, the increase didn't go into effect until mid-January 2013, which caused

the fishery to miss part of the prime December-March target season, and that industry reported the winter of 2013 was windy, making fishing difficult.

Didden said that re-establishing a market likely will require a consistent supply of high-quality butterfish and, so far, the 2014 fishery has yielded better results in terms of landings, fish size, and fat content, according to industry reports.

Joyce Rowley

*The science says the fish are there. I say, ‘Let's go get 'em.’*

—Eric Reid



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